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SUBJECT: "A PERFECT SPY" PROVIDES INSIGHTS INTO THE VIETNAMESE GOVERNMENT

1. (SBU) The story behind the upcoming Vietnamese publication of U.S. author Larry Berman's biography of North Vietnam's highest-level intelligence agent, Pham Xuan An, provides an informative lesson on the contradictions and complexity inherent in Vietnam's evolving political scene. The original decision to publish a Vietnamese language version of Berman's book was made by the GVN-owned, party-controlled NVA Publishing. That decision was then nearly reversed by GVN's own censorship office, most likely due to the numerous quotes from Pham Xuan An lamenting that Vietnam had simply traded one overlord for another -- the Soviet Union -- and his criticism of post-war policies.

2. (SBU) Upon learning that publication of "A Perfect Spy" was threatened by the censorship office, multiple state-owned media outlets, including the "Workers' Daily" (Lao Dong), "Youth Times" (Tuoi Tre) and other party-controlled papers increased their pre-publication publicity of the book in order to make it very difficult for the censors to cancel publication. Media reps even called colleagues to urge them to join the program. Similarly, when Berman met with representatives of the party-affiliated and GVN-sanctioned writers' union, the Vietnamese writers were even more outspoken, advising Berman not to "cave in to those [expletive deleted] censors by changing even one word." The writers also stated their intention to use what influence they have to ensure publication.

3. (SBU) In yet a further twist in the plot just prior to printing, the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) demanded that the first 20 copies off the press be delivered to the MPS for review. Fearing yet another tactic to delay or derail public release, pro-publication elements within the GVN joined the fray and successfully arranged for the first book off the press to be delivered not to the MPS, as demanded, but directly to President Triet, whom they believe will enjoy and endorse the book. The MPS will receive their copies only after President Triet has had a chance to review his own.

4. (SBU) COMMENT: The publication of "A Perfect Spy" provides an interesting perspective into the GVN's ongoing identity crisis. At a fundamental level, who wanted to publish the book (and even sent royalty checks in advance): The GVN. Who tried to block publication of the book? The GVN. Who waged a guerilla media campaign to ensure publication? The GVN. The lesson is clear: the GVN is not a monolith. In a reflection of a much broader continuing battle over the future and direction of overall reform in Vietnam, a large part of the GVN is actively promoting increased openness, even going so far as supporting the publication of a book in which one of the country's most renowned heroes unleashes broadside attacks on post-war GVN policy and the closed nature of Vietnamese society. Another part of the GVN is clearly not ready for these bold steps and is working to roll back the clock despite the fact that Pham Xuan An's story and views are already widely known. As the saga of "A Perfect Spy" -- as well as the great success of programs such

as STAR, the Vietnam Competitiveness Index, the Fulbright Education Training Program and others -- clearly shows, the pro-reform faction within the GVN has the upper hand. As the attempt to ban "A Perfect Spy" -- as well as the many recent setbacks in human rights -- reminds us, however, the counter-reform faction still yields considerable power. END COMMENT.

15. (U) This cable has been coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.

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